

As a hatchling, this 4-year-old male gray-banded kingsnake refused to eat anything, including lizards. He was force fed with a pinky pump throughout the fall and cooled down during the winter. After warming up in the spring he immediately began feeding on lizard-scented pinkies and switched to unscented pinkies soon after.



PICKY EATERS



This 9-month-old female *L. alterna* ate a pinky scented with a house gecko (*Hemidactylus garnoti*) the day after her first shed. After 12 feedings of lizard-scented pinkies she accepted an unscented pinky mouse and is now regularly eating large fuzzy mice.

Hatchling gray-banded kingsnakes might present a feeding challenge at first—these techniques will help.

article and photos by michael murphy

Hatchling gray-banded kingsnakes (*Lampropeltis alterna*) are considered difficult animals to raise, primarily because very few hatchlings will eat pinky mice, an inexpensive and readily available food item, on their own. Many accept only lizards or lizard-scented pinkies for several months after hatching, and some refuse to feed at all. Because of this finicky tendency, novice herpkeepers are often discouraged from keeping these beautiful and gentle animals. Although hatchling gray-banded kingsnakes can be challenging to raise, if you are patient and use a few proven techniques, you can eventually persuade most hatchlings to voluntarily accept unscented pinky mice. Once your gray-bands are feeding regularly, keeping them is as easy and enjoyable as keeping many other colubrids.

Housing and Heating

Proper housing is the first care consideration for your hatchling gray-banded kingsnake. Gray-bands, which are native to an arid environment, require a well-ventilated enclosure. I have successfully kept hatchling *alterna* in plastic shoeboxes with holes drilled in the sides. Because I frequently open the containers, the hatchlings get plenty of ventilation. I also had success using plastic containers designed for housing small animals. Although they are quite a bit taller than plastic shoeboxes, these containers have well-ventilated, tightly fitting lids. Suitable substrates include paper towels, newspaper, aspen bedding or pine shavings. Do not use cedar shavings. I prefer paper towels because they are inexpensive and easy to change, and there is no risk of accidental ingestion by the snake.

Heating is also important to the health of hatchlings. Subfloor heating works best, as gray-bands do not tend to bask in the wild; rather, they warm their bodies by lying on or near rocks or other objects heated by the sun. I had good results from

both rheostat-controlled heat tapes and ordinary household heating pads set on the lowest setting. Do not place plastic enclosures directly on the heat source, as they will easily melt or warp. Maintain the enclosure's temperature between 77 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit during the day; hatchlings can tolerate cooler temperatures at night. Regardless of the heating device you use, it is important to heat only one end of the enclosure in order to allow the snake to thermoregulate. This will also enable it to get to a cooler side should the tape accidentally overheat.

In the wild, the gray-banded kingsnake is a secretive, fossorial species. Individuals spend most of the day hidden underground within the cracks and crevices of their rocky habitat, rarely coming to the surface. Gray-banded kingsnakes are generally not nervous or flighty animals, but providing a hidebox for security could enhance your chances of success during feeding attempts. A hidebox can be as simple as a plastic deli cup or butter container with a hole cut into the side. A small water bowl, cleaned and refilled on a regular basis, will complete the setup.

Feeding

Avoid unnecessary contact with hatchlings before they go through their first shed, which occurs approximately seven to 14 days after hatching. Once your hatchling has shed for the first time you can offer it food. Although I have had other colubrid snakes eat in as little as one day after hatching, I have never had a hatchling gray-banded kingsnake eat before its first shed. If the hatchling was purchased from a breeder, set it up and leave it alone for a couple of days before attempting to feed it, even if it has already gone through its first shed. I have had a couple of baby *alterna* eat their first meals on the day that I received them, after being shipped thousands of miles in an airplane. Usually, however,

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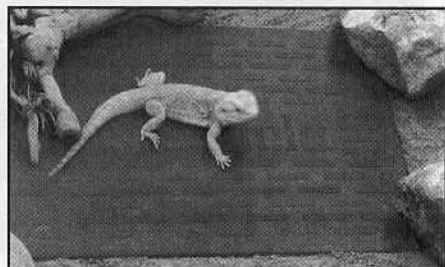
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these snakes will need a few days to get used to their surroundings.

Once the baby snake has shed and/or had a couple of days to acclimate to its new surroundings, offer it a small, 1- to 2-day-old pinky mouse. I always try a live pinky first, hoping that the movement will attract the snake and entice it to eat. Because gray-banded kingsnakes are nocturnal by nature, I usually leave the pinky in with the snake overnight. If the mouse is uneaten by the next morning, I remove it and replace it with a dead pinky; some hatchling snakes are intimidated by the movement of a live baby rodent but will quickly devour a dead one. Sometimes opening the head of a dead pinky to expose the brain elicits a feeding response in hatchling gray-bands. If the snake still seems uninterested, remove the pinky and wait a couple of days before attempting another feeding.

I usually attempt several feedings over several weeks with a live or dead pinky mouse before trying other methods. If the snake remains completely uninterested in live or dead pinkies after a few weeks, you may need to begin feeding it lizards or lizard-scented pinkies. First, offer the snake a pinky scented with a lizard. In the wild, gray-banded kingsnakes mainly eat lizards, including *Sceloporus*, *Uta*, *Cnemidophorus* and *Crotaphytus*. These lizards, therefore, work well as "scenters." I have also had excellent results using house geckos (*Hemidactylus garnoti*) and Mediterranean geckos (*Hemidactylus t. turcicus*), and limited success using brown and green anoles (*Anolis* spp.). I keep two lizards—a house gecko and a fence lizard—in the freezer to use as scenters. Lizards can be thawed and refrozen dozens of times. I have been using the same fence lizard as a scenter for more than two years.

To scent a pinky with a lizard, simply rub the lizard over the mouse; just one or two swipes with a lizard can turn a previously passive snake into a ravenous feeder. I generally use the vent region of the lizard to scent the pinky, concentrating on the pinky's head and rump. When you scent these areas more heavily, the snake will be more apt to begin swallowing the mouse from one end or the other, rather than from the middle.

If your snake accepts lizard-scented pinkies, you are on your way to success. To make the transition to unscented pinkies, simply scent the pinkies less and less, and continue to offer unscented pinkies first. I have had gray-banded kingsnakes switch

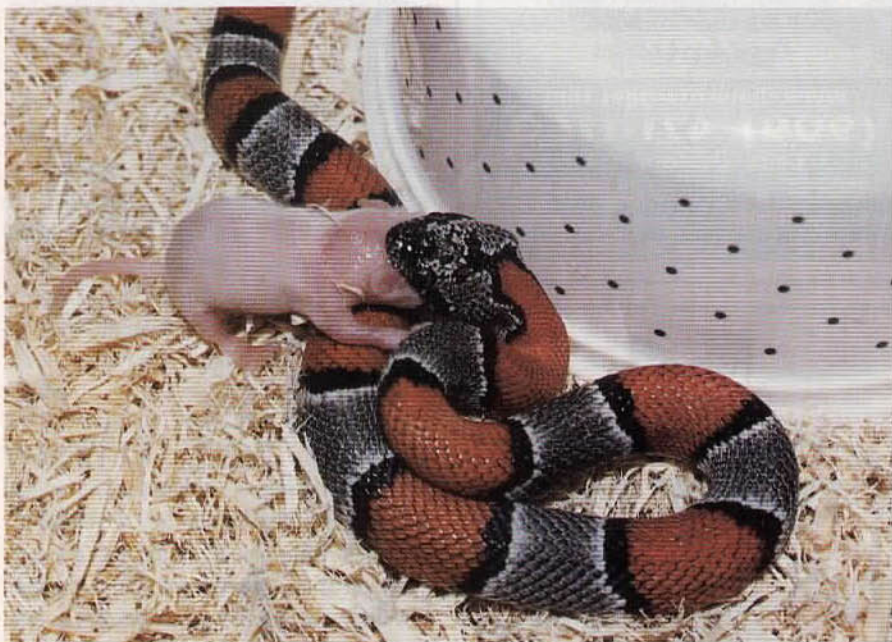


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ABOVE & TOP: At 9 months of age, this female gray-banded kingsnake eats one to two fuzzy mice per week. The smallest out of a clutch of 11, she ate unscented pinky mice soon after hatching. Other hatchlings were a little more problematic.

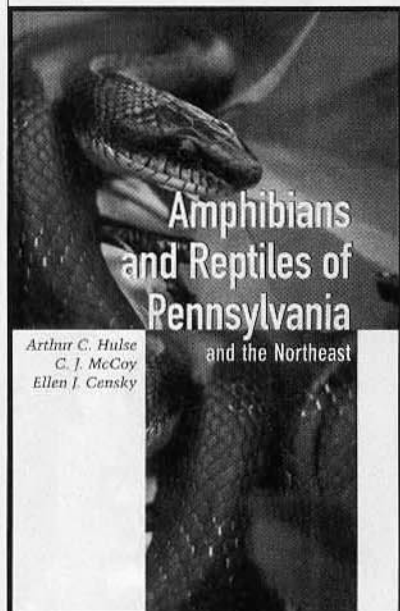
to unscented pinkies after being fed as few as four scented mice and as many as 21. Once feeding, they eventually switch to unscented pinkies.

Usually, I do not rinse the pinky before scenting it with a lizard, preferring instead to allow some of the mouse's natural scent to remain. The theory is that the hatchling will come to regard the scent of the mouse as that of a food item and switch to eating unscented pinkies more quickly. However, with some stubborn feeders it may be necessary to rinse the pinky in water before scenting it. You can also try breaking off a piece of the lizard's tail and inserting it into the mouth of a dead pinky. Again, offer both

live and dead scented mice. If the snake does not respond to the scent of one type of lizard, use a lizard of a different genus.

Chances are good that your snake will accept unscented pinkies or, more likely, pinkies scented with a lizard. If your snake refuses to eat pinky mice, whether scented or unscented, living or dead, try feeding it a lizard. A lizard may be the only food item a gray-banded hatchling will accept initially, and no amount of scenting will entice them to eat anything else. Many reptile dealers and pet stores stock or can order inexpensive "feeder" lizards, including house or Mediterranean geckos. It is best to freeze lizards before feeding

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them to your snakes as this will kill most parasites they may harbor. Please note that freezing does not kill *all* parasites. Place a thawed lizard at the entrance to the snake's hidebox and leave it overnight.

Finicky Feeders

At this point, most hatchling gray-banded kingsnakes will eat; only the most stubborn ones will completely refuse to feed. If it has been several weeks since the snake's first shed and it is still not feeding, you might need to force feed it. Hatchling gray-banded kingsnakes are relatively easy to force feed. Adult mouse tails and legs are great items to force feed to hatchlings. Be sure to lubricate the tip of the tail or leg with water; this will help it slide down the snake's throat and reduce the chance of injury to the snake. You can also sprinkle multivitamins on the tail or leg. The end of the tail or leg can be used to gently pry open the mouth of the baby snake. Once the object is in the snake's mouth, gently push it down into the snake's throat. Often, the snake takes over and finishes swallowing the item once it is down into the throat. Whole pinkies also can be force fed to baby snakes, but this is more difficult, because it requires some experience and a good pair of forceps.

Force feeding whole pinkies can also be accomplished by using a device known as a "pinky pump." This is actually a modified, stainless steel veterinary syringe with a thin, blunt tip. Dead pinkies are inserted into the glass barrel of the syringe and, as the plunger is depressed, they are macerated and forced down the snake's throat. I have had good results using pinky pumps; however, they must be used carefully and slowly so as not to injure the snake. It is best to have an experienced person show you how to use a pinky pump (or force-feeding techniques in general).

Even if it is necessary to force feed a stubborn snake always remember to offer it food between feedings, particularly immediately following a shed. Many of my hatchlings have suddenly started to feed on their own after several months of force feedings. Continue to offer pinkies (live and dead, scented and unscented) and lizards. Most stubborn feeders will begin to feed on their own once the weather begins to get warm, even if they are kept warm all winter. Another method that sometimes works well with problem feeders is to force feed a couple of meals through the fall and then cool the animal down in the winter. Be sure the

snake has had enough meals so that it will have adequate body weight to see it through the "hibernation" period. A snake cooled down in this manner often begins the spring with a healthy appetite.

Take the Challenge

While hatchling gray-banded kingsnakes are certainly not to be considered "beginner" snakes, those with experience should not be intimidated by them. Once hatchlings begin voluntarily feeding on mice, they tend to be extremely voracious feeders. My adult



Some hatchling gray-banded kingsnakes will only accept lizards for their first feedings. This male was fed thawed house geckos until he began eating lizard-scented pinkies.

gray-banded kingsnakes have been the most consistent feeders of all my snakes. Gray-banded kingsnakes are generally very hardy animals that reproduce well in captivity and rarely attempt to bite humans. Even though hatchling *alterna* often require more time and effort than hatchlings of other colubrid species, most keepers of this fascinating species would agree that they are well worth the effort. **R**

Further Reading

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